

THE DARK CITY¹

By CONRAD AIKEN

(From *The Dial*)

HIS greatest pleasure in life came always at dusk. Its prelude was the reading of the evening paper in the train that took him out of the city. By long association the very unfolding of the grimy ink-smelling sheets was part of the ritual: his dark eyes dilated, he felt himself begin to "grin," the staggering load of business detail, under which he had struggled all day in the office, was instantly forgotten. He read rapidly, devoured with ravenous eyes column after column—New York, London, Paris, Lisbon—wars, revolutions, bargains in umbrellas, exhibitions of water colors. This consumed three-quarters of the journey. After that he watched the procession of houses, walls, trees, reeling past in the mellow slant light, and began already to feel his garden about him. He observed the flight of the train unconsciously, and it was almost automatically, at the unrealized sight of a certain group of trees, oddly leaning away from each other, like a group of ballet dancers expressing an extravagance of horror, that he rose and approached the door.

The sense of escape was instant. Sky and earth generously took him, the train fled shrieking into the vague bright infinity of afternoon. The last faint wail of it, as it plunged into a tunnel, always seemed to him to curl about his head like a white tentacle, too weak to be taken seriously. Then, in the abrupt silence, he began climbing the long hill that led to his house. He walked swiftly, blowing tattered blue clouds of smoke over his shoulders,

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revolving in his mind the items of news amusing enough to be reported to Hilda; such as that Miss Green, the stenographer, who had for some time been manifesting a disposition to flirt with him, today, just after closing, when everybody else had gone out, had come to him, blushing, and asked him to fasten the sleeve of her dress. A delicious scene! He smiled about the stem of his pipe, but exchanged his smile for a laugh when, looking in through a gap in his neighbor's hedge, he found himself staring into the depraved eyes of a goat. This would add itself to the episode of Miss Green, for these eyes were precisely hers. He turned the corner and saw his house before him, riding on the hill like a small ship on a long green wave. The three children were playing a wild game of croquet, shrieking. Louder sounds arose at his appearance, and as he strode across the lawn they danced about him chattering and quarreling.

"Daddy, Martha won't play in her turn, and I say—"

"Marjorie takes the heavy mallet—"

The chorus rose shrill about him, but he laughed and went into the house, shouting only, "Out of the way! I'm in a hurry! The beans are dying, the tomatoes are clamoring for me, the peas are holding out their hands!"

"Daddy says the beans are dying. Isn't he silly?"

"Let's get to the garden before daddy does."

As he closed the door he heard the shrieks trailing off round the corner of the house, diminuendo. He hung up coat and hat with a rapid gesture and hurried to the kitchen. Hilda, stirring the cocoa with a long spoon, looked round at him laconically.

"Chocolate!" he shouted, and pulled a cake of chocolate out of his pocket. He was astonished, he rolled his eyes, for it appeared to have been sat upon—"in the train." Hilda shrieked with laughter. He thrust it into her apron pocket and fled up the stairs to change.

He could not find his old flannel trousers. Not in the cupboard—not in the bureau. He surrendered to an impulse to comic rage. "Not under the bed!" he cried. He thrust his head out of the window that overlooked the garden and addressed his children.

"Martha! Bring my trousers here this instant!"

He drew in his head again from the shower of replies that flew up at him like missiles and going to the door roared down to his wife.

"I've lost my trousers!"

Then he found them in the closet behind the door and, laughing, put them on.

II

He ran out of the side door, under the wistaria-covered trellis, and down the slippery stone steps to the vegetable garden.

"Here comes daddy, now," shrilled to him from Martha.

He lighted his pipe, shutting his left eye, and stood in profound meditation before the orderly, dignified, and extraordinarily vigorous rows of beans. They were in blossom—bees were tumbling the delicate lilac-pink little hoods. Clouds of fragrance came up from them. The crickets were beginning to tune up for the evening. The sun was poised above the black water tower on the far hill.

Martha and Marjorie began giggling mysteriously behind the lilacs.

"My hoe!" he wailed.

The hoe was thrust out from behind the lilacs.

"If anybody should drive up in a scarlet taxi," he said to Martha, accepting the hoe, "and inform you that your soul is free, don't believe him. Tell him he's a liar. Point me out to him as a symbol of the abject slavery that all life is. Say that I'm a miserable thrall to wife, children, and beans—particularly beans. I spend my days on my knees before my beans."

"I'll do nothing of the sort," said Martha.

He held his hoe under his arm and walked solemnly among the beans. The two girls followed him.

"Here's a caterpillar, daddy!"

"Kill him!"

"Here's another—a funny green one with red sparkles on his back. Oh, look at him!"

"Don't look at him! Kill him!"

"He squirts out like green tooth-paste."

"Don't, Martha!" he cried, pained. "Don't say such things! Spare your neurotic father."

He shrank visibly and strode off to the corner where his peas were planted and started methodically hoeing the rows, turning the rich loam up about the pale stalks. Now and again a pebble clinked, he stooped and threw it off into the meadow. Mary, the youngest, came to the top of the steps and cried. Martha and Marjorie went to her, and he forgot them. The rising and falling of the hoe-blade, shiny with much polishing in the brown soil, hypnotized him, and his thoughts fell into a sort of rhythm, came and went without his interference. "Ridiculous!" he thought, "that this solemn singular biped, whom other bipeds for convenience call Andrew, should stand here with a stick and scratch the skin of this aged planet. What does he expect to get for it? It pleases the aged planet. She stretches herself in the twilight, purrs like an old cat, and expresses her pleasure in the odd and useful effluvium we call peas. And this biped wears clothes. Think of it! He wears clothes; things made out of plant-fibre and sheep's wool cunningly and hideously made to fit his arms and legs. He has in his pocket—a small pouch made in these singular garments—a watch, a small shiny round object in which he has reduced to feeble but regular iambics the majestic motions of the sun, earth and stars. He takes it out and looks at it with an air of comprehension and puts it back again. Why doesn't he laugh at himself?" . . . He chuckled. . . . "This object tells him that he has time for two more rows before dinner. Clink, clink. Damn these pebbles. My antediluvian anthropoid ape of an ancestor had to walk round them, they were so huge. He sat on them, cracked nuts against them, chattered with his family. He had no watch, and his trousers grew like grass. . . . Thank the Lord they've become pebbles."

He sighed, and for a moment rested his chin on the hoe-handle, peering out towards the tree-encircled swamp. The hylas were beginning to jingle their elfin bells. A red-winged blackbird sailed in the last sunlight from one apple-tree to another.

"All a vicious circle—and all fascinating. Utterly preposterous and futile, but fascinating."

He dropped the hoe and trundled the wheelbarrow to the edge of the strawberry-bed.

"Why can't you stay where you're put?" he said. "Why do you grow all over the place like this?"

With a trowel he began digging up the runners and placing them on the wheelbarrow. It delighted him to part the soft cool soil with his fingers, to thrust them sensitively among the finely filamented roots. The delicate snap, subterranean, of rootlets gave him a delicious pang. "Blood flows—but it's all for the best; in the best of all possible worlds. Yield to me, strawberries, and you shall bear. I am the resurrection and the life." When he had a sufficient pile of plants, he trundled the wheelbarrow to the new bed, exquisitely prepared, rich, warm, inviting. With the hoe he made a series of holes, and then, stooping, thrust the hairy roots back into the earth, pressing the soil tenderly about them. Then he rose, stretched his back, and lighted his pipe, shutting his left eye, and enshrining the flame, which danced, in the hollow of his stained hands. The cloud of smoke went up like incense.

"Water!" he cried. "Water! Water!"

Martha appeared, after a moment, bringing the watering-pot. She held it in front of her with both hands.

"Quick, Martha, before they die. Their tongues are turning black."

"Silly!" Martha replied.

The earth about each plant was darkened with the tilted water, and the soiled leaves and stems were brightened.

"Listen, daddy! They're smacking their lips."

"They are pale, they have their eyes shut, they are reaching desperately down into the darkness for something to hold on to. They grope and tickle at atoms of soil, they shrink away from pebbles, they sigh and relax."

"When the dew falls, they'll sing."

"Ha! ha! what fools we are."

He flung the hoe across the wheelbarrow and started wheeling it towards the toolhouse.

"Bring the watering-pot."

Martha ran after him and put it in the wheelbarrow.

"That's right—add to my burden—never do anything that you can make somebody else do."

Martha giggled in response and skipped towards the house. When she reached the stone steps she put her feet close together and with dark seriousness hopped up step after step in that manner. He watched her and smiled.

"O Lord, Lord," he said, "what a circus we are."

He trundled the bumping wheelbarrow and whistled. The red sun, enormous in the slight haze, was gashing itself cruelly on a black pine tree. The hylas, by now, had burst into full shrill-sweet chorus in the swamp, and of the birds all but a few scraping grackles were still. "Peace—peace—peace," sang the hylas, a thousand at once. Silver bells, frailer than thimbles, ringing under a still and infinite sea of ether. . . . "Peace—peace," he murmured. Then he dropped the wheelbarrow in horror, and put his hands to his ears. "The enemy!" he cried. "Martha! hurry! Martha!" This time Martha seemed to be out of earshot, so he was obliged to circumvent the enemy with great caution. The enemy was a toad who sat by preference near the toolhouse door: obese, sage, and wrinkled like a Chinese god. "Toad that under cold stone." Marvelous compulsion of rhythm. . . . He thrust the wheelbarrow into the cool pleasant-smelling darkness of the toolhouse, and walked towards the kitchen door, which just at that moment Hilda opened.

"Hurry up," she said. Her voice had a delicious mildness in the still air and added curiously to his already overwhelming sense of luxury. He had, for a moment, an extraordinarily satisfying sense of space.

III

He lifted his eyes from the pudding to the Hokusai print over the mantel.

"Think of it with shame! We sit here again grossly feeding our insatiable bellies, while Fujiyama, there, thrusts his copper-colored cone into a cobalt sky among whipped-cream clouds! Pilgrims, in the dusk, toil up his sides with

staves. Pilgrims like ants. They struggle upwards in the darkness for pure love of beauty."

"I don't like bread-pudding," ejaculated Mary solemnly, "it's beany."

Martha and Marjorie joined in a silvery cascade of giggles.

"Where *did* she get that awful word!" said Hilda.

"Tom says it, mother."

"Well, for goodness' sake forget it."

Mary stared gravely about the table, spoon in mouth, and then, removing the spoon, repeated, "It's beany."

He groaned, folding his napkin.

"What an awful affliction a family is. Why did we marry, Hilda? Life is a trap."

"Mrs. Ferguson called this afternoon and presented me with a basket of green strawberries. I'm afraid she thought I wasn't very appreciative. I hate to be interrupted when I'm sewing. Why under the sun does she pick them before they're ripe?"

"That's a nice way to treat a neighbor who gives you a present! . . . You *are* an ungrateful creature."

Hilda was languid.

"Well, I didn't ask her for them."

Her eyes gleamed with a slow provocative amusement.

"They're beany," said Mary.

He rolled his eyes at Mary.

"Our kids are too much with us. Bib and spoon,

Feeding and spanking, we lay waste our powers!"

They all pushed back their chairs, laughing, and a moment later, as he lighted his cigar, he heard, from the music-room, Hilda's violin begin with tremulous thin notes, oddly analogous to the sound of her voice when she sang, playing Bach to a methodical loud piano accompaniment by Martha. Melancholy came like a blue wave out of the dusk, lifted him, and broke slowly and deliciously over him. He stood for a moment, made motionless by the exquisite, intricate melody, stared, as if seeking with his eyes for the meaning of the silvery algebra of sound, and then went out.

The sun had set, darkness was at hand. He walked to

the top of the stone steps and looked across the shallow valley towards the fading hill and the black water-tower. The trees on the crest, sharply silhouetted against a last band of pale light, looked like marching men. Lights winked at the base of the hill. And now, as hill and water-tower and trees became obscure, he began to see once more the dim phantasmal outlines of the dark city, the city submerged under the infinite sea, the city not inhabited by mortals. Immense, sinister and black, old and cold as the moon, were the walls that surrounded it. No gate gave entrance to it. Of a paler stone were the houses upon houses, tiers upon tiers of shadowy towers, which surmounted the walls. Not a light was to be seen in it, not a motion: it was still. He stared and stared at it, following with strained eyes the faint lines which might indicate its unlighted streets, seeking in vain, as always, to discover in the walls of it any sign of any window. It grew darker, it faded, a profound and vast secret, an inscrutable mystery.

"She is older than the rocks," he murmured.

He turned away and walked over the lawn in the darkness, listening to the hylas, who seemed now to be saturating the hushed night with sound. "Peace—peace—peace—" they sang. *Pax vobiscum*. He gathered the croquet mallets and leaned them against the elm tree, swearing when he tripped over an unseen wicket. This done, he walked down the pale road, blowing clouds of smoke above him with uplifted face, and luxuriated in the sight of the dark tops of trees motionless against the stars. A soft skipping sound in the leaves at the road's edge made him jump. He laughed to himself. . . . "He had no watch, and his trousers grew like grass. . . ." He took out his watch and peered closely at it. The children were in bed, and Hilda was waiting for a game of chess. He walked back with his hands deep in his pockets. Pawn to king-four.

"Hilda! Wake up!"

Hilda opened her candid eyes without astonishment and sat up over the chess-board, on which the tiny men were already arranged.

"Goodness! How you scared me. What took you so long? I've been dreaming about Bluebeard."

"Bluebeard! Good Heavens! I hope he didn't look like me."

"He did—remarkably!"

"A *nice* thing to say to your husband. . . . Move! Hurry up! . . . I'm going to capture your king. Queens die young and fair."

He smoked his pipe. Hilda played morosely. Delicious, she was when she was half asleep like this! She leaned her head on one hand, her elbow on the table. . . . When she had been checkmated at the end of half an hour she sank back wearily in her chair. She looked at him intently for a moment and began to smile.

"And how about the dark city tonight?" she asked. He took slow puffs at his pipe and stared meditatively at the ceiling.

"Ah—the dark city, Hilda! The city submerged under an infinite sea, the city not inhabited by mortals! . . . It was there again—would you believe it? . . . It was there. . . . I went out to the stone steps, smoking my cigar, while you played Bach. I hardly dared to look—I watched the hill out of the corner of my eyes and pretended to be listening to the music. . . . And suddenly, at the right moment of dusk, just after the street lamps had winked along the base of the hill, I saw it. The hill that we see there in the daylight, with its water-tower and marching trees, its green sloping fields and brook that flashes in the sun, is unreal, an illusion, the thinnest of disguises—a cloak of green velvet which the dark city throws over itself at the coming of the first ray of light. . . . I saw it distinctly. Immense, smooth and black, old and cold as the moon, are the walls that surround it. No gate gives entrance to it. Of a paler stone are the houses upon houses, tiers upon tiers of shadowy towers that surmount those sepulchral walls. No motion was perceptible there—no light gleamed there—no sound, no whisper rose from it. I thought: perhaps it is a city of the dead. The walls of it have no windows, and its inhabitants must be blind. . . . And then I seemed to see it more closely, in a twilight which appeared to be its own, and this closer perception gave way in turn to a vision. For first I saw that all

the walls of it are moist, dripping, slippery, as if it were bathed in a deathlike dew; and then I saw its people. Its people are maggots—maggots of perhaps the size of human children; their heads are small and wedge-shaped, and glow with a faint bluish light. Masses of them swarm within those walls. Masses of them pour through the streets, glisten on the buttresses and parapets. They are intelligent. What horrible feast is it that nightly they celebrate there in silence? On what carrion do they feed? It is the universe that they devour; and they build above it, as they devour it, their dark city like a hollow tomb. . . . Extraordinary that this city, which seen from here at dusk has so supernatural a beauty, should hide at the core so vile a secret. . . .”

Hilda stared at him.

“Really, Andrew, I think you’re going mad.”

“Going? I’m gone! My brain is maggoty.”

They laughed and rattled the chessmen into their wooden box. Then they began locking the doors and windows for the night.